

Exegesis on Romans 16:17ff.

Oak Park, Ill., May 11, 1950

DEAR BROTHER:

Permit me to call your attention again to the following resolution adopted by Synod at the Chicago Convention in 1947:

"WHEREAS, 'A Statement' as such no longer is a basis for discussion according to the 'Agreement' reported by the President; and

"WHEREAS, The issues raised by 'A Statement' and by memorials referring to 'A Statement' are being submitted for study to pastors and congregations on the basis of materials supplied by direction of the President; and

"WHEREAS, The subject matter is such as to call for time and patience, so that all pastors and laymen may have an opportunity to study the same in a quiet, earnest, and prayerful manner (a course which the Church should always follow); and

"WHEREAS, It is imperative that we continue on the foundation of God's Word, and God's Word alone; therefore be it

"Resolved, That the President continue to submit to pastors and congregations material for the Scriptural study of the questions at issue."

In accord with this resolution you are herewith receiving the promised exegesis on Romans 16:17 ff.

Kindly note that one of the "Whereases" of Synod's resolution states: "to study the same in a *quiet, earnest, and prayerful* manner." That this is especially necessary today should be obvious to everyone. In the interest of peace and harmony everyone should take this to heart. The author has treated the issue very objectively. Let us by all means remain objective in our study of it.

Kindly note also that the resolution states: "for the *Scriptural* study of the questions at issue." Let us approach the study with the definite question in mind, What does God teach in this passage? Scripture must decide.

This exegesis, since it is very scholarly, will serve primarily for pastors. However, pastors should acquaint their congregations with its contents.

May God graciously bless the study of this document!

Yours in Christ!

J. W. BEHNKEN

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
LIBRARY

INTRODUCTION

The vigorous debate which has been waged over Rom. 16:17 ff. in recent years has led to agreement in some points; but the chief question, the question upon which the present-day application of the passage depends, still remains open; that question is, of course: What manner of men were these division-makers and causers of offense against whom the warning is raised? To this question all the other questions that must be asked are subordinate: Were the men who are meant present in Rome and well known, needing no description for their identification, or is the warning general and prophylactic? Is the emphasis on division-making or on doctrinal aberration? Does v. 18 help to identify the errorists? Do they come with sinister intent? Are they sincere and in any sense Christian? In other words, does the passage apply to all errorists or only to extreme aberrations, denials of fundamental Christian truths?

The present study will concentrate on this decisive question, without detailed exegesis on every point. Textual variants have been ignored, since none of the variants is of importance for the question involved. The authorities cited are all scholars not involved in the present controversy; when a passage becomes a matter of controversy, it is salutary to appeal to objective witnesses. The italics throughout are our own.

The passage, Rom. 16:17-20, falls into three well-marked divisions: there is, first, a warning against errorists who cause divisions and offenses counter to the doctrine that the Roman Christians had learned; secondly, a justification of the warning; and thirdly, an assurance of St. Paul's confidence in the readers' Christianity and of God's help for a quick victory over all error.

The Warning

V. 17: I appeal to you, brothers, to note carefully those that cause divisions and offenses which are counter to the teaching which you received, and turn away from them.

The Warning Justified

V. 18: For such men do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own belly, and with their affectation of kind speech and their unctuous talk they deceive the hearts of those who suspect no evil.

The Assurance

Vv. 19-20: Now, the news of your obedience has reached all men. I therefore rejoice over you; but I would have you be wise in what is good and guileless in what is bad. And the God of peace will speedily crush Satan under your feet.

I

The first question we must ask of our text is: *Is the warning (v. 17) directed against specific errorists, already present in Rome and well known to the Roman church, or is the warning general?*

It should be noted at the outset that putting the question in this form is not strictly germane to the issue. The historical identification of the errorists is of relatively little moment for the Church of today; it is the *quality* of the errorists and of the error that is important. St. Paul's *Epistle to the Galatians* was used by Luther in the Reformation and is used by us today as normative for the life of the Church, despite the fact that no Judaizers demanding circumcision and the observance of new moons and Sabbaths beset Luther in the sixteenth century or beset us today. The issue which the Judaizers raised is with us always. Cephas and Apollos and the first-century Corinthian church are long dead and gone; but *1 Corinthians* 1—4 still speaks to us on factions and partisanship within the Church. We use *Romans* 14 and 15 still as normative for the relationship between the weak and the strong in faith, although diffidence regarding meat and wine and days is notably absent from the mind of present-day Christians. It would be impossible to parallel anywhere in Christendom today the peculiar blend of theosophic, ritualistic, and ascetic elements in the heresy that threatened Colossae in the time of St. Paul; yet *Colossians* still speaks against any teaching or tendency that shifts the Christian's faith and life away from the Center and Head, Christ. One could extend the list. Someone has said that the New Testament is case-law, not code-law; the expression is not a very happy one, but it does serve to indicate the "occasional," yet normative, character of much of the New Testament teaching.

To the question itself the exegete can give a cautious and undogmatic answer by pointing to the following facts:

a. The fact that the warning, though precise, is so brief and appears so late and, as it were, almost incidentally in the Epistle (the only contextual nexus is that of association of ideas, the idea of the unity of the Church latent in "The churches of Christ salute you," suggesting the threats to that unity) points to a potential rather than a present danger. The difficulties dealt with in chapters 14 and 15 are, as St. Paul's whole treatment of them shows, on a different level. The eloquent recognition of the good Christian estate of the readers, both in the immediate context (their well-known obedience; St. Paul's joy in them, v.19) and in 15:14 f. and 6:17 points in the same direction.

b. The use of the definite article with διχοστασίας and σκάνδαλα is not decisive. The translation "the well-known" rests on a misapprehension of the nature of the specific use of the definite article, as Robert George Hoerber has shown in his careful and objective study of the grammatical questions of our passage.¹ One might compare the use of the definite articles in a passage admittedly general in scope and of a similarly monitory nature, Eph. 4:14. Even scholars (e.g., Bernhard Weiss) who take the articles in the sense of "the well-known" are not inclined to assume that the errorists, or division-makers, are already present in Rome. The possibility that the Romans knew of them must be left open. But even so they would need identification. The errorists of, say, Galatia would hardly introduce themselves to the Roman church as "the well-known errorists of Galatia."

The passage itself, then, and the immediate context suggest that the people warned against were not yet present in Rome and were not, probably, personally known to the Romans. The Roman Christians are evidently expected to identify them from the description given in the warning itself. The warning is most likely a general and prophylactic one, though perhaps

¹ A *Grammatical Study of Romans 16:17*, Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, Wis. No date. His conclusion is (p.31): "The specific use of the definite articles before the substantives divisions, offenses, and doctrine do not imply particular divisions and offenses in the sense of well-known and obvious, or a particular phase of doctrine. The articles τὰς and τὰ, taken as specific articles, link their respective nouns to the phrase παρὰ τὴν διδασχὴν and mean 'the divisions and the offenses contrary to the doctrine.' The specific article τὴν merely connects the noun διδασχὴν with the relative clause ἣν ὑμεῖς ἐμάθετε, limiting the thought to 'the doctrine which you learned.'"

colored by St. Paul's past experience in Galatia and elsewhere, as we shall see later.

We are now ready for the really decisive question, the question on which the present-day application of the passage ultimately depends: *How are the errorists to be identified?*

The Roman Christians are urged to mark (in order to avoid) τοὺς τὰς διχοστασίας καὶ τὰ σκάνδαλα παρὰ τὴν διδαχὴν ἣν ὑμεῖς ἐμάθετε ποιοῦντας.

It is worth noting that the description of the errorists is a tightly knit whole: everything characteristic of them is packed between the article and the participle in a manner not altogether usual even in Greek and inimitable in English: "the-division-and-offense-counter-to-the-doctrine-which-you-have-learned-makers." This word order, which gives the whole expression almost the force of a compound noun, makes the much-discussed question as to whether παρὰ τὴν διδαχὴν modifies the participle ποιοῦντας or the nouns διχοστασίας and σκάνδαλα a question of minor importance.² Whether the process ("making") or the product ("divisions and offenses") be thought as being παρὰ τὴν διδαχὴν, the difference is a difference in expression rather than in meaning. In either case, the creators of divisions and offenses³ are branded as running counter to the διδαχὴ which the Roman Christians had learned.

Since there seems to be little difference of opinion on the terms διχοστασία and σκάνδαλον,⁴ διδαχὴ becomes the key term in the identifying phrase. And the usage of διδαχὴ is, both for classical Greek and the New Testament, singularly clear and uncomplicated. (The word occurs but once in the Septuagint, in the heading of Psalm 60 — Ps. 59:1, LXX.) Classical Greek uses the word in the sense of *teaching, instruction*, with a strong tendency toward emphasizing the fact or act of teach-

² We have adopted the latter alternative in our translation, justifiably we think. For a full discussion of the grammatical possibilities, see Hoerber, *op. cit.* Zahn, always sensitive to niceties of language, so translates. So also, apparently, Schlatter ("Die Entzweiung entsteht *an der Lehre*") and Sanday and Headlam ("Beware of those breeders of divisions and mischief-makers who pervert the Gospel which you were taught.")

³ The idea that the divisions and offenses are contrasted with justified divisions and offenses is remote from the context and is not justified by the usage of διχοστασία, which in *Gal.* 5:20 (the only other New Testament occurrence) is listed among the works of the flesh and has, in classical as well as Septuagint and post-apostolic usage, a generally bad connotation.

⁴ A warning against a too-neat distribution of the two terms, as-signing the one to doctrine and the other to practice, might be in place.

ing, so that διδάσκειν or διδάσκεσθαι might readily be substituted for the noun.⁵ In the New Testament, when the Synoptic Evangelists wish to sum up Jesus' διδάσκειν, His whole proclamation of the divine will, they use διδαχή (Matt. 7:28; 22:33; Mark 1:22 and parallels; 1:27; 4:2; 11:18; 12:38). Similarly the διδαχή of the Pharisees and the Sadducees comprehends their whole teaching, what they taught (Matt. 16:12), and the διδαχή of the Apostles includes the content and the activity of their teaching (Acts 2:42; 5:28; 17:19). In the Gospel of St. John likewise the word is used to sum up Jesus' διδάσκειν (John 7:16; 18:19). St. Paul, who uses the word six times, stays within the framework of this usage; he sums up the whole of Christian teaching as διδαχή⁶: so in Rom. 6:17, where being "given over to a form of teaching" describes conversion to Christianity, and in the present passage, where again there is nothing in the context to restrict the meaning to a particular teaching or doctrine, one particular branch or part of Christian doctrine.⁷ The word is here used broadly, to comprehend all the teaching that made the readers Christians; so much so that Joachim Jeremias in his commentary on the *Pastorals* can refer to the two passages in *Romans* as a genuinely Pauline "Betonung der Glaubenslehre als feste Norm" and Sanday and Headlam can in their paraphrase of the passage substitute "the Gospel" for "teaching" without doing violence to the sense. St. Paul's other use of διδαχή, to denote a διδάσκειν as called for from case to case, a focusing of the Christian teaching upon a given situation, is but a slight shift from the usage in the present passage and is marked as different by the absence of the article (1 Cor. 14:6, 26). In 2 Tim. 4:2 διδαχή is practically equivalent to διδάσκειν; in Titus 1:9, to διδάσκεσθαι; Goodspeed, for instance, renders the latter passage, "standing by the message that can be relied on, just as he was taught it."⁸

⁵ For examples cf. Rengstorf in Kittel, *Theologisches Woerterbuch*, Vol. II, pp. 166–167, on whose article the following is largely based.

⁶ Not only his own teaching, as Rengstorf mistakenly has it, *op. cit.*, page 167.

⁷ The closest approach to that sense in the New Testament would be *Hebrews* 6:2 (and possibly 13:9), where the context defines διδαχή more closely.

⁸ It has become apparent that the idea of systematization associated with our "doctrine" is not associated with διδαχή, which we have therefore rendered with "teaching." The idea of systematic, creedal formulation of doctrine is, of course, not in itself foreign to the New Testament. Cf. 1 Cor. 15:1–4; 1 Tim. 3:16.

The closest parallels in St. Paul would, then, be expressions such as we have in *Gal.* 1:8-9; *Col.* 2:6-7; and *Eph.* 4:20; the use of the noun διδαχή and the verb μανθάνω here, instead of something more personal or dynamic, like "Gospel" or "Christ," is to be accounted for by the fact that the situation calls for the exercise of careful insight and sober discrimination — although we should be careful not to conceive of either διδαχή or μανθάνω as one-sidedly intellectual in connotation: *Rom.* 6:17 ("Ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine . . .") should warn us regarding the one; and *Eph.* 4:20 ("Ye have not so learned Christ") regarding the other. Rengstorf aptly paraphrases "learn" in the *Ephesians* passage with "das volle Ja zu Christus und seinem Werk" (the whole-hearted yea to Christ and His work).

The "teaching" is best left in its broadest and fullest sense: all that the Christians of Rome had heard, learned, believed, obeyed, and said yea to, all that had made μαθηταί of them — that is the norm by which the divisions and offenses, and the creators of them, are to be measured and rejected. The point of cleavage is, in a word, the Gospel.

It may be objected that such a criterion is too broad to be practically useful, that the words are in fact but a reminder and a hint and not in themselves a touchstone and a guide. The exegete can only answer that as far as the evidence of the passage itself goes, St. Paul *did* expect the description to serve as a criterion, that he expected people who had "learned" the "teaching" and had "obeyed it from the heart," people for whom the breadth and depth of *Romans* was to be but a "reminder" (15:14 f.), to work out the implications of that teaching in their own lives. "Es scheint . . . dasz es einmal ein Publikum gegeben hat, dem man den Roemerbrief zumuten konnte, dem er eine Antwort auf seine eigenen Fragen war, das ihn irgendwie verstanden und geschaetzt haben musz. . . . Es scheint, dasz diese Geister sehr freie, sehr weite, sehr bewegliche Geister waren." (Barth.) St. Paul thought of this teaching as "the Word of God, which effectually worketh" in them that believe. The exegete can also point out that in a passage where St. Paul is solemnly pronouncing a curse upon every possible perversion of the Gospel, where he is drawing himself up, as it were, to full Apostolic height in the denunciation of error, the simple παρ' ὃ εὐηγγελισάμεθα and παρ' ὃ ἐλάβετε

(*Gal.* 1:8-9) serve as the line of demarcation between truth and error.

Is the emphasis on the creation of divisions or on the opposition to the teaching? Are the men warned against thought of primarily as division makers or as errorists? One wonders whether the Pauline and Biblical view of "teaching" leaves room for such an alternative. The teaching is obeyed from the heart; it shapes, informs, controls the whole man. Unity of heart and conduct is given with unity of teaching, inevitably. (*Eph.* 4:3-6; cp. v. 13; *Col.* 2:2.) Disunity comes from division on doctrine, inexorably (*1 Cor.* 1:10, 13; cf. the whole section to the end of chapter 4). When St. Peter caused a division at Antioch (the occasion was the very practical question of table fellowship between Gentile and Jewish Christians), his conduct and that of those who followed his is described by St. Paul as οὐκ ὀρθοδοδοῦσιν πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου (*Gal.* 2:12-14) — the issue involved in the division is the "teaching," the doctrine of justification by faith without the works of the Law.

What does ἐκκλίνετε ἀπ' αὐτῶν mean?

The word ἐκκλίνειν means literally to *bend or incline away from*, and the various shadings of meaning which the word can have are all easily derived from this basic sense. The word occurs three times in the New Testament, here and in *Rom.* 3:12 (absolutely used) and *1 Pet.* 3:11 (of turning aside from evil). Since neither of the passages deal with the avoidance of persons, they do not cast much light on the use of the verb here. A passage in the apocryphal *Wisdom of Sirach*, however, is illuminating:

Do not talk much with a senseless man,
Or go to see a man of no understanding;
Beware of him, or you may have trouble,
And do not be dirtied when he shakes himself.
Avoid him (ἐκκλινον ἀπ' αὐτοῦ), and you will find rest.
(22:13, tr. Goodspeed)

Here "avoid" sums up and climaxes the preceding parallel expressions. In later Christian literature Ignatius uses the term in a passage (*Eph.* 7:1) dealing with false teachers and apparently influenced by *Rom.* 16:17: "For some are accustoms to bear the Name about with malicious guile, while they practice other things unworthy of God; you must shun (ἐκκλίνειν) them as you would wild beasts."

The term is a strong one, and it is hardly dealing fairly with the text to break the force of the injunction by a *reductio ad absurdum* of "avoid." To avoid occasioners of divisions and offenses altogether would involve going out of the world, just as a literal avoidance of fornicators would (1 Cor. 5:9-10). It is the exegete's business to establish the intended sense of a word or a passage; it is not exegesis arbitrarily to take a word from the plane of its contextually established meaning and to remove it to another. The plane here is that of religious fellowship: we are dealing here with the teaching which the Roman Christians had received, with servitude to the Lord Christ, with the God of peace who will crush the enemies of His Church quickly. In such a context it should be obvious what "avoid" means.

II

Our study of v. 17 has led to the conclusion that the warning is general and inclusive. When we press the question further and ask *how* inclusive — when we go on to ask whether it can include sincere errorists or only such as come with sinister intent, whether the errorists in question are in any way still Christians, then it becomes necessary:

1. To determine the function and meaning of v. 18; and
2. To consider the wider context of the warning.

1. THE FUNCTION AND MEANING OF V. 18

Verse 17 takes no cognizance of intentions at all; it states with the utmost objectivity that the errorists to be avoided do in fact occasion divisions and offenses counter to the received teaching. The present participle ποιῶντας cannot be pressed to include an indication of intent, sinister or otherwise. No other tense would be possible in a general description, and the tense says no more than that the men in question do what they do habitually and persistently (transient lapses do not fall under the warning). One might compare 1 Cor. 7:29-30, where the present participles cannot by any stretch of ingenuity be made to express intent.

But does not v. 18 give us further characteristics to aid us in identifying the errorists to be avoided? The exegete will have to point to the form and the content of the sentence and answer, "No." In form the sentence is a causal clause and

gives the grounds for the warning; it is not a continuation of the identification that is contained in the warning. A fair parallel to the grammatical relationship between the two verses would be a sentence like the following:

Look out for the black and white dog next door; for he bites strangers. "He bites strangers" is not a continuation of the description begun in "the black and white" and "next door"; the words do not help to identify the dog; rather, they serve to justify the warning. Or, to construct an example closer in substance to our two verses:

Beware of men who agree too readily to everything you say; for such men are insincere flatterers and are guided by self-interest. It is obvious that the *for*-clause does not serve as a continuation of the description in the warning.

In content, too, v. 18 is hardly designed to serve as a further means of identifying the errorists; the attitudes here ascribed to them are such as are not empirically verifiable, and the methods attributed to them are exactly the kind that make identification difficult.

The verse is designed, then, not to identify the errorists further, but to justify the strength and peremptoriness of the warning and command. It does so by uncovering the ultimate source from which the making of divisions and the causing of offenses counter to the received teaching springs. The language is strong, recalling the language used by St. Paul in *Galatians*. What, exactly, is St. Paul saying in regard to the ultimate hidden springs of will and intent of such men?

The primary thing that St. Paul says of "such men" is that they do not "serve" our Lord Christ. The word δουλεύειν is perhaps the strongest possible expression of entire and undivided devotion to a lord. Rengstorf has given classic expression to all that is contained and implied in the idea of the δουλεία Χριστοῦ⁹:

Zu der Bindung an Gott, fuer die die Wortgruppe [δούλος, δουλεύω, etc.] hier und da benutzt wird, tritt die Bindung der von der δουλεία der Welt, Suende und des Todes Befreiten an den Befreier selbst. Das ergibt sich ohne weiteres aus dem Ziel der Loskaufung, das nicht Autonomie, sondern Gehorsam ist. Indem Christus den Loskauf vornimmt, macht er die Menschen also zu seinem Besitz, zu solchen, die fuer die Gestaltung ihres Lebens nun durch ihn Anweisung und Zielsetzung empfangen. Dieser Verhaf-

⁹ In Kittel, *Theologisches Woerterbuch*, Vol. II, pp. 278—279.

tung wird der sprachliche Ausdruck verliehen dadurch, dasz die Christus Verhafteten seine δούλοι genannt werden (1 Cor. 7:22; Eph. 6:6; vgl. Rom. 14:18; 16:18; Kol. 3:25) . . . er [der Ausdruck] stellt vor allem fest, dasz es keinen Weg zu einem geordneten Verhaeltnis mit Gott und zu einem Gottesdienst gibt, an dem er Gefallen hat, *auszer ueber die bedingungslose Uebergabe an ihn und dadurch, dasz er durch sein Werk und sein Wort das Verhaeltnis des Menschen zu Gott und vor Gott, also auch sein Verhalten innerhalb der natuerlichen Bindungen, in seiner Ganzheit souveraen regelt.*

Zu beachten ist noch eins. Wenn im NT das Verhaeltnis der Christen zu Christus mit δουλεύειν öä beschrieben wird, so enthaelt dieser Sprachgebrauch immer ein Bekenntnis zu dem, was gesehen ist, und die Bereitschaft, *aus den vorliegenden Tatsachen in allerpersoenlichster Form die Folgerungen zu ziehen.*¹⁰

Such whole-souled devotion to Christ, Paul had claimed for himself when he first introduced himself as an Apostle to the Romans (Rom. 1:1), and he had gone on to describe himself as one segregated unto the Gospel; such whole-souled devotion must be denied those who create dissensions and offenses counter to the teaching the heart and center of which is Christ. They are not men, obviously, "who have their lives shaped and formed by His command and have their goal in life set by Him." In the *Epistle to the Galatians* St. Paul had in like manner said of himself that if he watered down his Gospel in order to please men, he would no longer be a δούλος of Christ.

But man is never autonomous; he always has a lord. It is always a sharp either-or; God or Mammon, flesh or Spirit,

¹⁰ Tr.: The word group, used occasionally to designate the bond which ties a man to God, is used also to designate the tie which binds the man who has been liberated from the slavery of world, sin, and death to the Liberator Himself. This follows naturally from the goal of the liberation; this goal was not autonomy but obedience. When Christ undertakes to redeem men, He makes them His possession; He makes of them men who now have their lives formed and shaped by His instruction and have their goal set by Him. This being bound and consigned to Christ finds expression in the term "slave," applied to men so bound and consigned. . . . The expression, above all, establishes the fact that there is no way to an ordered relationship to God, no way to a worship that pleases God, save the way which leads through unconditional surrender of self to Christ; to the point where Christ by His Word and His work sovereignly controls and rules in its totality the relationship of man to God and before God consequently determines man's conduct within the natural ties of his existence.

One more point is to be noted. When the New Testament describes the relationship of the Christian to Christ with δουλεύειν and the like, this usage always involves a confession on the Christian's part to what has been wrought by Christ and his readiness to draw the consequences of the redemptive facts for his very own person.

slavery to sin or slavery to righteousness, being a slave to Christ or to something or someone else. This something else St. Paul here calls their κοιλία, their belly.

The word has been much discussed. An absolutely literal interpretation is, of course, impossible — unless we wish to think of “holy” men contemplating their navels, as in India. Three interpretations are in themselves possible, as far as the usage of the word itself goes:

- a. *The innermost self*;
- b. Various shadings of the metonymy, *gluttony*, or *sensuality*;
- c. A bitter and contemptuous allusion to the Judaistic insistence upon the *legal-ritual regulations of clean and unclean foods*.

Interpretation a) can appeal to *John* 7:38 and to the usage of the Septuagint, which often renders the Hebrew כֶּמֶן and מַעֲיִם with κοιλία. Examples of this usage are *Job* 15:35; *Prov.* 20:27, 30; *Lam.* 1:20; *Is.* 16:11; *Ps.* 39:9.

The correctness of this interpretation is called into question by the absence of any *Pauline* parallel, by the fact that it does not seem to have occurred to any commentator not involved in the present controversy, and by the antithesis to “our Lord Christ.” The last is perhaps the strongest objection to taking κοιλία as *innermost self*. We should expect something stronger than “innermost self” as the antithesis to devoted servitude to Christ. St. Paul does use the idea of self-insistence and self-seeking (ἐριθεία) in connection with a refusal of the truth (*Rom.* 2:8) and the proclamation of the Gospel out of impure motives (*Phil.* 1:17), but there is nothing closely resembling our expression in his language regarding errorists elsewhere.

Interpretation c), the reference to Jewish ritual regulations regarding food, would have much to commend it if we could be certain that St. Paul had Judaizing errorists exclusively or even particularly in mind. But although there is a strong probability in this identification, we cannot call it a certainty. We shall perhaps be safest in adopting, in some form, interpretation b), taking κοιλία as a metonymy for sensuality. However, as Denny puts it, “The words need not

mean that the teachers in question were mere sensualists, or that they taught Epicurean or antinomian doctrines; *the sense must partly be defined by the contrast* — it is not our Lord Christ whom they serve; on the contrary, it is base interests of their own. It is a bitter contemptuous way of describing a self-seeking spirit, rather than an allusion to any particular cast of doctrine." Similarly, Sanday and Headlam: "These words do not in this case appear to mean that their habits are lax and epicurean, but that their motives are interested, and their conceptions and objects are inadequate"; and Kirk: "merely a forcible synonym for interested motives." Althaus: "In Wahrheit geht es den Leuten nicht, wie sie vorgeben, um den Dienst Christi, sondern um ihr eigenes Ich und daher, wie bei Allen, die fuer sich selber leben, zuletzt um sinnlichen Lebensgenusz"; Hodge: "The description here given is applicable, in a great degree, to errorists in all ages. They are not actuated by zeal for the Lord Jesus; they are selfish, if not sensual"; Philippi: "V. 18 begruendet die V. 17 enthaltene Vorschrift durch Zeichnung der selbstischen Tendenz und verderblichen Wirkungsweise dieser Menschen"; Tholuck: ". . . laeszt sich nicht bezweifeln, dasz er zelotische Judaisten im Auge hatte, welche bei den judenchristlichen Mitgliedern die Leidenschaften anfachten und dabei nicht einmal von reinem Gesetzeseifer, sondern von Selbstsucht geleitet wurden"; N. P. Williams: "implies not so much that their personal conduct is lax as that their main motive is material self-interest"; Dummelow: "They seek their own interests, and their religious ideas are low and material." One could probably extend the list, which was compiled on no principle but that the commentators in question have no ax to grind in our present controversy. The expression should hardly startle us, coming from the lips of St. Paul, who sees truth and error in such diametrical opposition that he can call even the severest asceticism a catering to the flesh (*Col. 2:23*); that he can call a reversion to the hallowed practices of the Old Testament a relapse into idolatry (*Gal. 4:8-11*); that he who, where circumstances demanded it and the Gospel was furthered by it, himself circumcised a Timothy (*Acts 16:3*), yet puts circumcision on principle, for Christians, on a par with the religious self-mutilation of the devotees of a Cybele (*Gal. 5:12*; cf., e. g.,

Lightfoot or Althaus *ad loc.*). This is the St. Paul who called Peter's uneasy withdrawal from the common table at Antioch a diverging from the straight path of the Gospel truth (*Gal.* 2:14) and ultimately, by implication at least, a setting at naught of the grace of God (*Gal.* 2:21). And so we should not be surprised either to find him tracing the error against which he warns to Satan himself (v. 20). "Sie sind im Grunde Werkzeuge Satans" (Althaus). St. Paul is, after all, only echoing the Lord Christ, whom he serves: "The enemy that sowed them is the devil" (*Matt.* 13:39). How close together the Christian and the Satanic can be, how nearly they can resemble each other, Our Lord's reply to St. Peter, the Confessor, the Rock, shows (*Matt.* 16:23).

2. THE WIDER CONTEXT OF THE WARNING

Does the sharply critical either-or that St. Paul here draws between the error and the truth at issue permit us to consider the errorists as in any sense sincere, within the pale of Christendom? Can we apply the warning and the injunction of the passage to errorists whose Christianity we feel compelled to admit? The answer has in part been indicated. Perhaps the wider historical context of the *Epistle to the Romans* will help us further to an answer. Whether the warning be general (as we believe), specific (as has been maintained by some), it was dictated by St. Paul's past experience with error, division, and offense. The most persistent troublers of Pauline congregations and Pauline missions in this respect, in the period before *Romans*, were undoubtedly Judaizers, known to us best and most clearly from the *Epistle to the Galatians* and the *Book of Acts*. *Acts* (15:5) tells that they were Pharisees who had come to the faith. St. Paul's language concerning them in *Galatians* is stern and uncompromising, designed to lay bare the fundamental contradiction between their propaganda and the Gospel of the free grace of God in Christ Jesus. But the very force and fury of his language is evidence that what the Judaizers brought was deceptively like the real article. What they preached was, in their understanding of it, "another Gospel," and it is understandable that whereas St. Paul stresses the "another," they stressed the "Gospel." It is not beyond imagination to think that they were of the

conviction that they were propagating a more conservative type of Christianity, the genuine Jerusalem variety, made of sterner stuff than the man-pleasing dilution of it that St. Paul had originally proclaimed among the Galatians. As for their "sincerity," scholars as diverse in their theological outlook as J. Ph. Koehler of the Wisconsin Synod, on the one hand, and Wilfred Knox and Juelicher, the hard-headed historian, on the other, are inclined to leave the question open, the question, that is, as to how far they were conscious of the clash between their Gospel and the true Gospel, or of the interested character of the motives that prompted them to proclaim it:

KOEHLER: Zwei Dinge sagt der Apostel von diesen Leuten aus: sie verwirren die Galater, sie wollen das Evangelium Christi verkehren. Der Apostel sagt nicht, dass die Verfuehrer des bewusst sind, dass sie verwirren und verkehren. Die werden wohl die Meinung gehabt haben, dass sie das Rechte tun. . . . Was sie aber nun tun, das nennt Paulus ein Verwirren und Verkehren und lehrt uns, dass die gute Meinung, die wir haben, uns nicht entschuldigt, wenn unser Tun sich gegen das Evangelium Christi kehrt. Dann ist es auch im letzten Grunde boes gemeint, selbst wenn wir uns einbilden, wir haetten es gut gemeint.¹¹

KNOX: Many of the Gentile converts were overawed by the prestige and sanctity of men who had been disciples before Paul himself. *The new teachers did not deny any of his positive teaching.* He was right in saying that Jesus was the Messiah promised to Israel, that He had risen from the dead and would soon return in glory. It was true that faith in Him was the means to attain to righteousness. But this did not dispense the Christian from the duty of observing the Law which God had revealed to Moses; that Law was the mark of the covenant between God and His chosen people and the means by which the believer was enabled to separate himself from the hideous vices of the Gentile world. Paul's omission to insist on the Law was merely an attempt to win converts easily by "pleasing men."

JUELICHER: Sie selber haben diese "Werke des Gesetzes" nicht in einen Gegensatz zum "Glauben" (wie Paulus tut 3:2,4) gestellt, sondern sich, wie mit sehr begreiflichem Erfolge den Galatern, eingeredet, dass die volle Gerechtigkeit, die doch gerade der Glaue-

¹¹ Tr.: He says two things of these people: they are confusing the Galatians, and they want to pervert the Gospel of Christ. The Apostle does not say that the misleaders are conscious of the fact that they are confusing and perverting. They were probably of the opinion that they were doing the right thing. . . . But what they do, Paul calls confusing and perverting and teaches us that when our actions are turned against the Gospel of Christ, they are, ultimately, actions of evil intent, even when we imagine that our intentions were good.

bige erringen moechte, nur durch stricte Erfuellung des im Gesetze geoffenbarten Willens Gottes erreichbar sei.¹²

Similarly, ALTHAUS paraphrases the claims of the Judaizers thus: . . . sie behaupteten, er [Paulus] sei kein unmittelbarer Juenger Jesu, sondern abhaengig von den Uraposteln in Jerusalem. Diese wahren Apostel aber verkuendeten allein *das ganze Evangelium, das sie, die Judaisten, nun den Galatern braechten, um zu "vollenden," was Paulus "begonnen"* (3:3). Er haette, um den Galatern zu gefallen (1:10) und leichter zu Erfolgen zu kommen, ihnen verschwiegen, dasz nur der *ein wahrer Christ* sein koenne, der das mosaische Gesetz befolge.¹³

It is not improbable that St. Paul's warning, general as it is, is colored by his experience with just this type of errorist, the professedly Christian creator of divisions and offenses.¹⁴ This is borne out by the character of the whole *Epistle to the Romans*, where the implicit antithesis are those of *Galatians*, without, however, the polemical point of the latter epistle; the list of Paul's acquaintances in Rome (16:7) contains names of those who "were in Christ before him," probably members of the original Jerusalem church; and Zahn is probably right in his suggestion that there was strong and continued contact between Rome and Jerusalem, though he is wrong no doubt in viewing the Roman churches as predominantly Jewish Christian in character. The language of the warning itself (κοιλία, εὐλογία) is possibly also to some extent colored by this antithesis.

In one other point the wider context of the New Testament may throw light on this question. The errorists are described as creators of σκάνδαλα. The usage of this word has

¹² Tr.: They themselves did not place these "works of the Law" in antithesis to "faith" (as Paul does 3:2, 4), but convinced themselves and (with a success not altogether incomprehensible) the Galatians that the full righteousness which the believer above all others would like to achieve could be attained only by strict fulfillment of the will of God as revealed in the Law.

¹³ Tr.: They maintained that he [Paul] was no immediate disciple of Jesus, but dependent on the original Twelve in Jerusalem. These true Apostles alone, they maintained, were proclaiming the whole Gospel, which Gospel they, the Judaizers, were now bringing to the Galatians in order to "complete" what Paul had "begun" (3:3). Paul, they said, had not told them that only he could be a true Christian who obeyed the Mosaic Law; he had kept silence on this point in order to please them (1:10) and to achieve results more easily.

¹⁴ Karl Barth (*Der Roemerbrief*, 1924) remarks on *Romans* 16: 17-20: "Huetet euch vor den Verwechslungen und vor den naechstliegenden und einleuchtendsten am meisten!" He, too, is evidently thinking of "Christian" types or error.

not been sufficiently observed in the discussion of this text. If we study occurrences of *σκάνδαλον* and *σκανδαλίζω* in the New Testament, we shall find that in almost every instance where *men* cause (or are) offenses, they are within the Church Visible. Let the following passages be studied in their context:

Matt. 13:41: "The Son of Man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather *out of His kingdom* all things that offend. . . ."

Matt. 16:23: "But he turned and said unto *Peter*, Get thee behind Me, Satan; thou art an offense unto Me. . . ."

Matt. 18:6-7 (Note that these words are addressed to Jesus' disciples; cf. vv. 1 and 2 and the Lukan parallel, *Luke 17:1*: "Then said He *unto the disciples*. . . .): "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in Me, . . . Woe unto the world because of offenses! For it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh!"

Rom. 14:13: "Let us not therefore judge one another any more, but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling block, or an occasion to fall, in *his brother's* way."

1 Cor. 8:13: "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend."

Less clear, but perhaps also within the scope of our investigation, is *1 John 2:10*: "He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him." Similarly, *2 Cor. 11:28-29* does not state clearly the source of the offense, but the context suggests that it is within the Church. *V. 28*: "Besides those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches." *V. 29*: "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is offended, and I burn not?"

It is the Christian who is peculiarly liable to be or occasion an offense to his fellow Christian, to cause him to fall, to mislead him into unbelief, or false belief. A Jew demanding circumcision would occasion no uneasiness or doubts in the Christian's mind; a Jewish Christian making such a demand would. A pagan Corinthian eating meat offered to idols would not be an offense to a Corinthian Christian; it is the brother eating the meat that occasions the offense. A pagan philosopher

coming with ascetic and theosophic teachings would not have occasioned offense at Colossae; when a Christian sect came with such teachings, the offense was there: the Colossians began to doubt whether they had all that pertains to life and salvation in Christ alone. A pagan denying the reality of the Incarnation and promoting libertinism was no offense to the Christians of Asia Minor; Cerinthus was. To leave the New Testament and to come to modern times for one more example: a Mohammedan, or even a Unitarian, wearing the Masonic apron or practicing fellowship with a Rabbi would be no particular offense to a Lutheran; a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ wearing the apron is; he is, like Peter at Antioch, setting aside the grace of God.

CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest that the interpretation traditional in our circles is essentially sound. It is not the exegete's business, strictly speaking, to go beyond the interpretation of the text itself to its application; but he may with propriety remind the Church (1) that *Rom. 16:17 ff.* is not the whole of New Testament teaching on error and errorists and that the whole of that teaching should be brought to bear on any given situation; (2) that the traditional interpretation, which our study has confirmed, does not, by any means, mean an easy way out for the Church: the warning both in its breadth and its severity lays upon the Church a solemn obligation which can be met only by long, intensive, and loving theological *work* — the Church should not be startled to find that the decision on error is not always easy or the question of fellowship always simple; and (3) that the passage is to be applied to ourselves, too, in constant self-scrutiny and self-judgment — a Church that complacently deems itself above the possibility of belly service is already dangerously close to serving its belly.